

The button on the carpet

Written by Pedro Meyer



I went to a farewell party given for a friend of mine; it was in a home in the Hollywood Hills. I was standing around waiting for the food to be served when I noticed that a button had fallen off

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my shirt. I bent down to look for it on the floor and to my surprise I discovered lying right there before me an array of colors and shapes that I had not noticed before. My first reaction was to grab my camera and record an image of the moment. I have looked at that picture off and on for quite some time now; it has grown on me. I started to wonder why.

It dawned on me that I didn't have a clue as to who was in the picture. I did not know the person sitting there with the green pants and purple socks. From looking at the evidence I couldn't determine the profession of the individual wearing such attire, after all it could be a painter, a lawyer or doctor (remember, this was Hollywood), an art historian, an actor, a curator, a caterer, undercover policeman, athlete, decorator, clown, salesman, tourist, poet, web designer, musician, etc . I do remember however that they were all very amused that I would take a picture of the button as I had found it on the carpet. As so often happens, only the photographer knows what is going on within the frame. The evidence found in this picture sends one scuttling for a time reference anchored in the sixties (even the shoes!), yet here we were in the mid-nineties when the picture was made. Photography is so confusing when it comes to being a reference to the "real," isn't it?

I am drawn to such pictures because photography is open-ended, and capable of making countless statements that have more to do with the viewer's perceptions than with what the image actually contains. Some viewers would find the fact that there was a button on the carpet (I did not put it there digitally...honest!) an ineluctable proof of the documentary integrity of this picture (provided nothing else had been altered, obviously) but would mention nothing about the color rendition of the photograph, evidently assuming that the colors in the carpet, and socks, and table, etc. actually were identical to those which could be seen at the party. But how would I know what those exact colors were? How does anyone remember an exact color? Does it matter what the exact colors actually were?

Judging by the great effort it takes to make color reproductions as good a match as possible to

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the original (both in print and on the screen, as well as in photographic prints), I can safely assume that in most cases we are observing nothing more than a "close" reproduction of what the "real" color actually looked like. Now this is not a trifling issue, as many psychologists, art historians, and designers would agree, as colors have a definite emotional connection to what human beings derive from looking at them.

If we find that colors within photographs hardly ever live up to their original reference, and no one appears to make too much of a fuss about this (yet we know that the values of colors are undoubtedly important), then why would we raise our eyebrows if the button in my picture had been placed there by me? Why am I asked, " but you did not put the button there, did you? " and yet no one ever asks me for the exact color match of the socks, for instance.

I now understand why I have been attracted to this picture over time. We don't know who is in the picture, when it was made, nor if anything that is shown to us in the image actually was the way it looks.

Funny, some people consider such a straight picture (I even have a negative to prove that it was not altered) to be a documentary image!

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